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Essay #2

What Hangs From My Ears

Now that I am old enough to support myself and provide for my needs and wants in life, I will readily admit that I have spent entirely too much money on shopping. But my true love is not a new top or a cute pair of boot cut jeans, and I have never been one to obsessively buy shoes like Sarah Jessica Parker in *Sex and the City*. I prefer to hoard earrings.

Every morning (provided I don’t forget), I try to take at least a full one to three minutes picking out and comparing pairs of earrings to throw on my earlobes as I rush out of my room—late to my early classes, as usual. Shall I wear my pink beaded chandelier earrings, or the Spanish gold studs? Are my red spirals with the diamond drop charm too big for how I did my hair today? Oh, the decisions I must face.

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My maternal grandma’s jewelry stand stood about five feet tall, with doors on each side to hang necklaces and drawers and a bottom cabinet to store rings, bracelets, jewelry boxes, and other treasures my grandma liked to collect. When she wasn’t looking, I used to open the top drawer and marvel at that part of her collection, trying on rings and finding the earring matches in the jumbled mess and laying just so in the divided sections. My grandma never let me wear any of her real jewelry, just a strand of beads every now and then that wasn’t worth much. Of course, I was a child, or preteen, and completely irresponsible and clumsy. She’d continuously scold me for letting the holes in my ears close up, threatening to give all her earrings to her sister’s granddaughter, even her old clip-ons. I’d always respond by getting angry that she’d not let me have any of them regardless of the condition of my earlobes; I was the only girl she had left. My mom was dead. It was her duty to give them to me.

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Jacob, my twin brother, has bloomed in his sense of accessory fashion over his twenty years of life. For Christmas three years ago, he surprised me with three trendy pairs of earrings made of the square beads and the thin shell material that were “in” at the time. One pair of the square-beaded earrings are brown, the other a dark blue-green. I wear the blue-green earrings, but I don’t really wear brown. I don’t like to wear things that blend in with my skin. But I didn’t expect him to know that. I still like them. I accidentally crushed one of the shell earrings, but I keep its match hanging with the others. I wish I hadn’t been so klutzy with them; they really are pretty classy. When we were kids, I used to steal his Dragonball Z shirts and baggy pants. He hated it and wanted me to “dress like a girl.” I guess we’ve both bloomed over the years.

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I have a pair of purple and gold earrings I received as a gift from a friend as a freshman in college. Mrs. Barbara was the first non-traditional student I had ever met. At 65, she was taking Spanish for fun. I was taking Spanish because I thought I wanted a minor in it. I don’t remember how our conversation about earrings came about, but a couple of days later she came in with a homemade pair for me. With layered parts of different sizes, the biggest one being a down-facing triangle at least two inches in length, these earrings are gaudy, yet fascinating in their complexity. A big rhinestone diamond tops off the earrings. I’m still not sure how I feel about them. I think Mrs. Barbara said she didn’t make them herself, but I have neither worn them nor plan to in the future. I keep them tucked away in a box somewhere with the other “not-really-my-style” jewelry I’ve collected over the years. As for Mrs. Barbara, she moved out of the country after that semester, to Germany I think. She never really liked to stay in the same place for a very long time.

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I don’t remember smaller details of my mother, just the big things. Scarves to cover her head, wigs Jacob and I used to play with. Big breasts and a bigger body, from what I figure now must have been from being pregnant with twins. And chemo maybe, but I’m not going to ask my dad if radiation made my mom fat. But I did ask my dad once, two years ago maybe, after making him listen to my innocent but incessant chatter about my newfound love for earrings, if my mother had liked them as well. “She loved earrings and lipstick,” was his quiet reply.

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To date, I own 65 pairs of earrings that sit out in display holders on my desk and on my shelf. Add the earrings put away in a box under my bed or in storage at home with the finer jewelry I won’t keep at school, and I have well over a hundred, almost 150. The two display holders are filled with the earrings passed down from my grandma and my mom, along with the ones I have collected on my own. My tree sit display on my desk sits on my printer (that’s out of ink) amid a mess of papers and bags of things I don’t know what to do with. My organizer display is nestled in my bookshop, slanted books and fabric cube drawers surrounding it. Yet my earrings remain neat and intact, despite my cluttered room. My favorite pair at the moment is a pair of silver hoops that run through a central hole of a flower. The flowers have two silver layers of petals and a smaller middle circle of pink gems. Another pink gem hangs down from the back layer of petals. I purchased them on a short shopping trip with my coworkers and our bosses while we were out-of-town at a conference a few months ago. These earrings cost me one dollar before taxes. I like to wear with my darker clothes in the winter.

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According to my grandma, I had to get my ears pierced at three months because everyone who looked at us thought my mom had twin boys. I’m not sure why I ever let them close up for those few awkward teenage years of my life. I was at that stage when I had no boobs and was not allowed to wear makeup. And I was overweight. No wonder I never had a boyfriend. Maybe if I had worn earrings back then, I would have felt just a little more confident about the body from which they hung, as I do now. Some of my earrings I wear to dress up more for the occasion; other times, I wear earrings to make myself feel more attractive. I especially like to wear my long chandeliers or drops when I want to feel sexy. There’s something about the way they fall close to the neck, sliding against my collarbone and shoulders when I tilt my head that makes me feel like I have something more to offer than just my personality.

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In every picture of my real mom, she is wearing earrings. And I can go through my jewelry and match up each pair in the pictures with the earrings in my collection. She wears the red Creole-style earrings in my favorite picture of her, her body slightly turned to the left, her face smiling into the camera, her dark black hair halfway covering the earring I can see. My dad stands beside her with his arms wrapped around her, staring into her face with pure happiness and contentment, as if no one else is around. They are in complete and utter love with each other. In a Christmas photo taken a few short years later, she holds up a pair of opal studs; is this a present to help distract from her now bald head, perhaps? I often wonder how earrings made her feel. Did she debate with herself every morning before she went to work? When did she discover her love for them? I hope they made her feel sexier whenever she wore them. I hope they at least made her feel prettier when she paired the perfect ones with the scarves for her head. She doesn’t smiling as wide in this picture.

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I frequently refer to Tonia Crow as my momma. She was my Algebra II teacher for a semester when I moved states and changed guardians, from Texas to Arkansas and from my dad and stepmom to my older brother. I came out to my parents about the abuse I had suffered as a child. Between the death of my mother and the arrival of my stepmom, my dad’s first son came to live with us. The teenager my dad had fathered and trusted abused my brother and me day in and day out. Jacob was more physically abused, I was sexually abused, and we were both consistently torn down with his words. When I finally came out to my parents about the sexual abuse, my stepmom became so overprotective she felt like she would go crazy if she continued to have to care for me. So I was pretty much asked to leave everything I had known and start over in the spring of my junior year. I of course was damaged by this. It wasn’t my fault that this had happened to me, right? I guess it didn’t matter. And so I moved in with my brothers. At school, I became especially attached to Mrs. Tonia, mostly during my senior year, because she was one of the only truly understanding people in my life. I was moved into her house the Monday after I graduated high school. Her home is my legal permanent address and when I say I am going “home,” I am generally referring to her house and her family. She taught me how to appropriately make a business call when I had to renew my own insurance at eighteen (government insurance) and the main differences between men and women (the use of logic versus emotions). She has a husband who also treats me like a daughter and three children who all call me their older sister. My momma and I differ in our earring preferences. She favors one pair of smaller, simple, squarer-looking silver hoops. I received my set of three different silver hoops from her on a shopping trip this year during a long weekend break we both happened to get at the same time, mine falling at the usual time for my university, and hers by random chance of parent-teacher conference change-ups. These silver pairs are my go-to earrings for when I can’t decide on a certain pair or if I don’t have time to debate. They are used when I am not in the mood to be grandiose in my earring choice and I am actually wanting to have a “Mrs. Tonia” look. Sometimes I feel like her when I choose the simplicity of sliver hoops. Though sometimes I wonder if she would ever include me in the passing down of her possessions. I used to think she would, but I am growing up now. I don’t know if she would pass her earrings down to me, especially after her and I finally convinced her oldest daughter to get her own ears pierced.

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Chelsie is my best friend. Chelsie lives in Texas. I left her when I left my parents and the world I knew before moving to Arkansas. Chelsie has always been one to give me her clothes and accessories when I went to visit. She would give me lots of clothes on multiple occasions and still would not have made a dent in her closet or drawers. The earrings she’s given me range from simple and innocent, like a pair of salmon colored studs, to long, beaded, multi-strand drops. The studs she must have given me because she was growing out of them; after I left, Chelsie got a boyfriend and has since lost all innocence. The drops I think she would take back if I gave them to her; they seem to fit her “free” personality a lot more now.

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My grandma had a stroke during my senior year of high school, which sped up her dementia. My older brother, who had guardianship of Jacob and me, made me stay with her while she was in the hospital. At first I thought she’d get better and remember things, but after the first few days, I realized she’d never even be able to recognize who I was. With each passing day, she remembered me and everyone around her less and less. My brother had no choice but to put her in a nursing home. In the year that followed, we tried to gather everything in her house that was dear to us. I cleared out most of her jewelry. I thought the rest of it would always be there. I didn’t want or need the smaller things, or the cheap things, like her clip-on earrings. But then my brother had to give my grandma’s estate over to her sister and brother-in-law because he misused her money. He was young and had a lot on his plate. He had to take care of Jacob, my grandma, me, and then a baby on the way by his girlfriend. My aunt had to sell the land, the house, and everything in it to help pay to keep her in the nursing home. I wasn’t there for the auction, and I regret not buying my grandma’s jewelry box. I can only hope it was bought by a loving grandmother as a wedding present to her granddaughter or something.

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There is one pair of earrings in which I am intentionally missing half. I have one angel wing. My best friend has the other. My stepmom gave me the earrings when I was visited one occasion, because she doesn’t like to wear to earrings with hooked backings. I believe this was the visit she started giving me things. It’s as if she is trying to make up for making me move out at sixteen. She says she regrets it, and I believe her. If she could, she’d take it back and put up with her paranoia. But I still wonder if I’d rather have stayed in Texas and miss having Mrs. Tonia. I’m not sure I would, and I’m almost glad I’ll never have to know.

I immediately gave one of the earrings to my Chelsie as a cheesy way to “never forget each other.” I think we just like cheesiness. The wings are her style, and I like them because they were my stepmom’s, and now one of them is my best friend’s. Each one rests in a hole in the ear of the teddy bears we exchanged for Valentine’s Day when I got to visit. She was dating around in between guys and so had no one steady to take her out, while I was working and still had no one to take me out anyway. So we were each other’s valentines.

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Some of my earrings I have story after story for; for others, I can’t tell if they used to be my grandma’s or my real mom’s, or maybe even both of theirs at some point. The vast majority of my collection has been passed down from someone, and I have only begun to amass my own original miscellany. Maybe I’ll have a daughter, and she can spend her time wondering which were mine, and what belonged to generations past. But for now I’ll keep collecting.